

# Cracks in the Wall

## Perspectives on Mental Illness in Literature and Science

Roman Bischof

About the PhD Project

- Aim:** Analysis of representations of mental illness in English language novels since the middle of the twentieth century
- Focus #1:** How do the narrative and the language of novels interact with and challenge scientific discourses?
- Focus #2:** How is the concept of 'illness' in relation to the human psyche represented in novels? How does this relate to ongoing cultural debates on mental health?

Thesis

While scientific definitions of mental illnesses aim at facilitating diagnosis and medical treatment, literary accounts negotiate the personal and cultural ramifications of these definitions. Narratological, stylistic and conceptual variety help to broaden the perspective on mental illnesses and to soften the strict boundaries of "normality".

Keywords: Narratology, Cognitive Poetics, Medical Humanities

### For Example ... Schizophrenia

The Scientific Perspective

Schizophrenia affects about 1% of the global population and has been linked to genetic predispositions, specific structural and chemical abnormalities within the brain and psychosocial factors such as family-related stress. The latter are however not considered able to cause schizophrenia on their own (Smith et al. 555).

The diagram features a central box labeled "Symptoms of Schizophrenia" with five orange lines radiating outwards to five categories of symptoms. Each category is further detailed with specific examples. The categories are: Delusions, Hallucinations, Disorganised speech, Grossly disorganised or catatonic behaviour, and Negative symptoms. The background of this section includes a faint illustration of a person's head with multiple faces and a person standing with their back to the viewer, looking down.

- Delusions**  
fixed beliefs unaffected by conflicting evidence (paranoid schizophrenia: fear of being poisoned, followed etc.)
- Hallucinations**  
sensory experiences in absence of corresponding external stimulation (most commonly auditory, e.g. voices)
- Disorganised speech**  
rapid shifts between topics, idiosyncratic word associations (often by sound rather than meaning)
- Grossly disorganised or catatonic behaviour**  
strange gestures & facial expressions, child-like behaviour, unpredictable agitation or unresponsiveness/immobility
- Negative symptoms**  
reduced emotional expression in speech, gestures and facial expressions

(American Psychiatric Association, Smith et al.)

The Literary Perspective

**John Wray's *Lowboy* (2009):** Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, protagonist Will Heller displays many of the symptoms associated with the illness yet their intensity varies over the course of the narrative. The immediacy of Will's illness is mediated e.g. by changes in narrative voice and stylistic peculiarities such as limited punctuation (see second quote).

There were times when he was practically invisible, monochrome and flat, and there were others when he gave off a faint greenish glow, like teeth held up to a blacklight. When that happened his voice got very loud very fast and the only thing he could do was keep his mouth shut. (Wray 13)

Don't say that to me Will she said. Don't say that. Thanks for coming Violet I shouted. Don't worry about me I have got ideas. (Wray 177)

**Nathan Filer's *The Shock of the Fall* (2013):** Protagonist and narrator Matthew Homes's illness is represented chiefly through his own reflection on past events and its depiction relies heavily on figurative language. Metaphors like the ones quoted here highlight the dangers of Matthew's condition as well as its manifestation as a deficiency and a burden which is hard to shake off.

It's like we each have a wall that separates our dreams from reality, but mine has cracks in it. The dreams can wriggle and squeeze their way through, until it's hard to know the difference. (Filer 21)

I have an illness, a disease with the shape and sound of a snake. Whenever I learn something new, it learns it too. (Filer 67)

THE MIND IS A HOUSE

- Walls provide protection and stability.
- » Cracks in a wall threaten stability (mental health) and let in dangers (delusions, hallucinations) from outside.

SCHIZOPHRENIA IS A SNAKE

- Snakes' actions are hard to predict.
- Snakes can move fast and quietly squeeze through small openings.
- » A snake (schizophrenia) is hard to control and it can sneak up on a person at any moment.

Sources

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. 5th ed. Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

Filer, Nathan. *The Shock of the Fall*. London: Borough Press, 2014.

Smith, Edward E., et al. *Atkinson & Hilgard's Introduction to Psychology*. 14th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003.

Wray, John. *Lowboy*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010.

Graphics

"Cracked Wall" by sunshine-91/Vecteezy.com

"Schizophrenia" by vivaelpato.deviantart.com